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ABSTRACT

In most debates about teaching, learning, and research, the spatial context of education is either taken for granted or ignored. But places can be viewed as more than empty frames for social action; they can be seen as both historically constituted by social processes and, in turn, constituting those social processes. This paper aims to restore a sense of place to the discussion of the education of adults by locating the connections among space, teaching, learning, and research in one particular place: Cornwall (England). The University of Exeter's Continuing Education department developed a part-time degree in Cornwall. After setting out the theoretical context, the problems of evolving and delivering this part-time degree are located in the context of Cornwall's location as a periphery in a set of center-periphery relations. These relations help to explain both the constraints experienced in developing the degree and the teaching method and curriculum design that are being evolved. Program developers initially thought about ways to compensate for the distance from Exeter (and the supposed deprivations of being on the periphery) but later came to rethink their teaching methods to maximize local resources and help learners reflect on Cornwall's strengths. Curriculum design focused on transferable skills such as technology skills and teamwork and on promoting the explicit awareness of center-periphery relations, notably through a strong element of Cornish Studies. (Contains 29 references.) (SV)

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Centering a degree on the periphery: curriculum design in Cornwall and the politics of place

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The spatial dimension of higher education in Britain has yet to find an obvious place in the literature. In most debates about teaching, learning and research the spatial context is either taken for granted or ignored. It becomes a mere container for educational and social processes. But places can be viewed as more than empty frames for social action; they can be seen as both historically constituted by social processes and also in turn constituting those social processes (Paasi, 1991). We aim in this paper to restore a sense of place to the discussion of the education of adults. We do this through locating the connections between space, teaching, learning and research in one particular place - Cornwall. After setting out the theoretical context, the problems of evolving and delivering a part-time degree in a Continuing Education department in Cornwall are located in the context of Cornwall's location as a periphery in a set of centre-periphery relations which help to explain both the constraints experienced and the teaching method and curriculum design that are being evolved.

The absence of an explicit discussion of space in the literature might be seen as unexpected for three reasons. First, its explicit absence is accompanied by an implicit presence. Spatial metaphors abound in discussions of adult learning. For instance, educational technology can be viewed as 'central' in the progress of distance education institutions such as the Open University (Evans and Nation, 1996), mature students are 'marginal' in higher education (Wilson, 1997) and learners are at the 'centre' of the learning process (Edwards, 1991). Second, we are informed that the university is now turning inside-out or exploding (Schuller, 1990). The place of learning is where the learner is. Universities are encouraged to develop their regional and local role. In this policy debate about the changing institution, place would appear to be taking on a new importance. And third, in a range of academic disciplines there has, arguably, been a 'spatial turn' over the last decade. In all directions a new awareness of spatial difference and the role of space and place is surfacing, in sociology (Day and Murdoch, 1993; Lobao, 1996), history (Kearney, 1989; Phythian-Adams, 1987), politics (Meny and Wright, 1985) and cultural studies (Basnett, 1997).

The spatial theory most commonly employed outside geography is that of core-periphery or centre-periphery. (Ironically, some geographers themselves are now rejecting this as insufficiently flexible for capturing the dynamic political and social relations that it purports to model (Agnew, 1995)). Centre-periphery theory, while taking on a number of guises, broadly involves a relational, comparative view of space. The paired concepts of centre-periphery can be used in two ways. They can form the basis of a model which explains behaviour. Thus places are situated in relation to centres and peripheries in a context of uneven development. Such a model highlights the territorial dimensions of the relations between economically more developed, politically more powerful and culturally more self-confident centres and economically less developed, politically weaker and culturally fragmented peripheries. Peripheries are then seen as 'distinct contexts, they form units of analysis worthy of our attention' (Wellhofer, 1995). Alternatively, centre-periphery can be seen as a cultural representation reproduced by certain interests, usually in the centre, and reproducing certain myths about both centre and periphery (see Chapman, 1992).

Cornwall can be seen as a periphery in both of the above senses. It has a chronically weak economy, with, according to Angela Eagle, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, in a recent Commons debate, per capita GDP at levels only 69% of the European Union average (Hansard, 1st April 1998, col.1390) and its lack of political institutions is a symptom of political powerlessness. At the same time such economic and political conditions of peripherality have, it is argued, resulted in heightened 'expressions of difference' as people in this periphery consciously react against their condition (Payton, 1992). In addition, Cornwall has long

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been imagined as a place apart by those in the centre, reproduced as a land of mystery and its people and landscape invested with the characteristics of otherness by novelists and tourist publicisers alike (see the contributions to Westland, 1997).

Political, economic and cultural peripherality have their counterpart in academic peripherality. Cornwall occupies a position of disadvantage in terms of the provision of higher education opportunities. Tight (1996), in one of the few attempts to provide a spatial dimension for higher education provision, has described the geographical patterns of participation. Cornwall is poorly provided for both full-time and part-time student places, along with other peripheral areas on the north, west and east of England. This disadvantage in terms of provision is exacerbated by the way the status scales of academic life are tilted.

Cornwall's local university was, before the 1990s, Exeter. Yet Exeter is located 100 miles from Cornwall's major population centre at Camborne-Redruth. Geographical distance tended to be extended by social distance. As late as 1967 writers based at Exeter could write about Cornwall as if it were a foreign country. According to the introduction to *Exeter and its Region*, published in 1969, Cornwall was 'still a land of many regions, mutually remote and parochial and very slow to change'. Exeter, in contrast, with its cathedral and university, was a part of 'metropolitan England', cultured and civilised (Barlow, 1969, 4). Exeter, present in Cornwall in the shape of a continuing education programme, had not developed degree provision there before the 1990s. Instead options for part-time degree study were provided by the Open University, which was recruiting higher than average numbers of students in Cornwall, while full-time degrees could be studied at Camborne School of Mines, later to amalgamate with Exeter University, and Falmouth School of Art, both specialist institutions with a limited range of courses.

Since the 1980s, however, there has been a considerable growth in the provision of both full and part-time places in Cornwall. But this expansion of degree places has occurred without the physical establishment of a university or higher education campus in the county. Instead, it has happened through a twofold process of what Tight (1996) describes as 'academic drift' (based on Burgess and Pratt, 1970) and 'academic expurgation'. Academic drift, the aspiration of institutions for higher status in the academic hierarchy, can be seen in the expansion of degree level and sub-degree HE courses (validated mainly by Plymouth and Exeter Universities) in the Further Education sector in Cornwall. In addition to Tight's vertical academic drift we may discern a horizontal drift as institutions move to capture new markets. Thus Falmouth School of Art changed its name to Falmouth College of Arts and in 1996 began to offer a part-time degree in English and Media Studies in an attempt to diversify away from its traditional concentration on the visual arts and design. At the same time academic expurgation, 'the tendency for academic institutions to drop their lower level work' (Tight, 1996) appears in franchised courses.

The outcome is a fragmented and unplanned provision, focused on certain disciplines but with limited choice in other areas. This fragmentation in terms of the curriculum is mirrored by a spatial fragmentation as six different centres in Cornwall (plus the Open University) compete for students, a pattern encouraged by the dispersed local settlement hierarchy. Such a provision, incoherent, ad hoc and unplanned, can be read as a corollary of academic peripheralization. Opportunities for pooling student resources are limited, and the consequence for staff qualified to teach at HE level is a jigsaw of short-term contract arrangements. While this proliferation of part-time contracts is a national phenomenon, representing the marginalisation of a category of academic staff defined by terms and conditions of employment (Schuller, 1990; Swain, 1998), it is also characteristic of general employment patterns in Cornwall, with a high proportion of casual and seasonal work generated by an economy overdependent on the tourist industry (Perry, 1993, 73-74).

Centres and peripheries can also be identified on different spatial scales. While Cornwall can generally be described as a part of the academic periphery, within Cornwall there are embryonic local HE centres and, as a consequence, local peripheries. Whether the building of a physical academic 'centre' is essential for further local HE development has become a matter of intense local

controversy. The University of Exeter planned a small prestigious campus near Penzance which has so far failed to attract sufficient funding (University of Exeter, 1995). The University of Plymouth has campaigned with one of the local FE colleges for a different kind of 'university of the future', dispersed over a network of education and training opportunities'; however, its latest publication also talks of forming a nucleus on a 'central campus' (Cornwall College, 1998). This debate is conducted in a political climate that makes it hard to pin down useful definitions of academic centres in terms of their key functions.

It is in this context that Exeter's Continuing and Adult Education Department has developed its first part-time degree in Cornwall. In this case, the 'centre' is the Department's base in Truro, housing offices and seminar rooms; the main venue is a nearby FE college with larger lecture rooms. Academic staffing consists of one lecturer employed on a full-time permanent contract and a panel of part-time staff. The second part of this paper gives a brief account of the thinking behind the development of a part-time degree in Cornwall. Initially, we were influenced by centre-periphery forces that caused us to look to the centre. However, subsequent reflection on the problems of peripherality led us to consider how we might overcome some of its constraints and begin to subvert dominant representations of peripherality held both by learners and others. It is here that theory connects most obviously to practice as we have begun to build into the degree profile elements that engage with and challenge the peripheral condition.

Developing a part-time degree in Cornwall

The development of a part-time humanities degree (BA in Historical and Cultural Studies) by Exeter's Department of Continuing and Adult Education can be explained as part of that wider movement of continuing education departments in the older universities into degree provision as a result of the changing funding environment in place since 1992 (see Rickwood, 1995). There is a general problem shared by all such provision in overcoming the marginality of adult and part-time learners. In Cornwall such concerns are exacerbated by the further challenge of marginality from the institutional core at Exeter, 90 miles away from Truro.

When this degree was first planned, we thought initially about ways of *compensating* for the distance from Exeter (Westland, 1998). This was primarily an issue of ensuring high quality provision for our students, but the necessity of obtaining a 'licence to practise' from the centre was never out of the picture. We had to convince the centre that a 'real' degree could be offered at what has often been dubbed an 'outpost' in the sticks. We were indeed acutely conscious of the resource implications of working at the margin with none of the economies of scale shared by Continuing Education departments based on campus. We also imputed to local learners a sense of these deprivations on the periphery, including a vague idea that they were missing out on the 'campus experience'.

It was not until the second stage, once the framework degree had been validated, that we set about *re-evaluating* the centre/periphery relationship. Was the approach we had adopted of minimising the drawbacks of being on the periphery, in order to meet the criteria of the centre, calculated to reinforce those very attitudes that we wished to overcome? Had we too easily made the assumption that the intellectual life of a university was at Exeter (or an urban centre like London)? Should we instead be attempting to support the development of students who were in every sense 'centred' - intellectually and psychologically capable of working in and looking out from the periphery with confidence? We began, as teachers, to re-think our teaching methods in order to maximise our local resources and also to help learners reflect on Cornwall's strengths and thus begin to re-think notions of resource-rich centres and resource-poor peripheries.

We therefore reviewed the components of transferable skills and subject content to identify elements relevant to our peripheral location. The most obvious need was adequate IT skills and facilities to access library catalogues, data bases and the Internet. This, we now saw, was more than a matter of compensating for a lack of campus facilities. The availability of information on line not only makes up for the lack of a campus library; it is also a powerful symbol of new possibilities for information exchange across institutional and international boundaries that minimises the necessity for formal membership of an institution. Carefully designed assignments can give a taste of these possibilities. However, it is becoming clear that a new kind of in/out division is being created among learners:

between those that have the skills and equipment to access the technology and those who do not. Dedicating a computer in the Truro department to those students geographically close enough to the 'centre' to make use of it outside the course evening may still disadvantage students who are living in more remote areas and unable to finance a home computer system. To partly redress this inequality, one of the first exercises undertaken by students (at the point where they join the degree programme after gaining 120 Level 1 points in the Department's Certificate programme or in other institutions) is to survey the Open Learning centres and other IT and library resources close to their home. Their findings will be pooled for future students, so that every year students are actively involved in updating a data bank of IT and information resources in Cornwall.

The second relevant skill, closely related to the first, is 'the identification and use of resources', slanted to the exploration of subject resources within the county. Part of a summer learning pack, designed to help students make the transition from Level 1 to Level 2, involves finding documents, buildings, locations, art works and artefacts linked to a specific area of British culture: this year, 'The Sea 1750-1840'. The third key skill, 'working with others', is a focus for certain tasks in the summer pack not only to develop teamwork abilities but also to build 'cells' of small groups of students working together which will then, we hope, grow into a wider network when term begins. The summer pack is introduced at an induction workshop in July where provisional 'cells' are formed; a main feature of the report back session in September is a brief presentation from each group based on one local finding.

The development of transferable skills should always be explicitly stated to students. In this case, the particular relevance of certain skills to their survival on the periphery should be made apparent in the workshops. But what may also emerge from structured discussion is a more sophisticated understanding of 'peripherality'. Do these students in fact feel inferior to undergraduates on campus, or do they feel a difference that is potentially a strength? What exactly do they imagine are the advantages of studying in Exeter or living in a cultural centre like London? Are there in fact benefits of a Cornwall as a 'learn place' that may not be shared by students at Exeter? In other words, high in the list of desirable 'intellectual attitudes' for our graduates is an understanding of centre-periphery politics. Geographically, the concept will present little problem to Cornwall students. The political, economic and cultural implications of marginality will be a theme tackled during induction and threaded through the curriculum.

This explicit awareness of centre-periphery relations infuses the curriculum design, notably through a strong element of Cornish Studies. This is a growing area of academic interest and one where the resources are not remote from us but local: the Institute of Cornish Studies (funded by the University of Exeter and Cornwall County Council and staffed by three full-time academics) is on our doorstep in Truro; the Record Office and two libraries with major Cornish Studies collections are within ten miles of us. Incorporating Cornish Studies into the main curriculum makes sense in terms of maximising local resources and facilitates the introduction of a thorough and theorised on-going debate on peripherality.

Ironically, this determination to challenge concepts of geographical and academic peripherality coincides with the predicted disintegration of university 'centres'. It is becoming increasingly clear that universities are being radically redefined in ways that weaken their claim to be necessary 'centres' of learning. One dimension is the tendency within every discipline and subject area for lecturers to locate their community on an international network rather than within their own institution. Another is the emphasis on the 'learn place' as the place of study, more often than not away from the campus (Ford, 1996). If these academic centres are already 'exploding' (Schuller, 1990), geographical peripheries, which are accustomed to coping differently and growing in political awareness, may well come into their own.

Working at the margins may indeed produce new insights, emphasising the 'centrality' of spatialization, the social construction of the spatial (Shields, 1991). Researchers at the edges of conventional disciplines, it has been suggested, are more likely to produce new thinking (Dogan and Pahre, 1990). Territorial as well as disciplinary margins may well benefit from a similar effect of 'creative marginality'. Particularly but not exclusively where Cornish Studies is concerned, our

students will be exposed to a lively inter-disciplinary research culture, one that gains its strength from its location on the periphery. The determination of the course team to reflect actively as practitioners on their own role in developing and delivering a programme on the periphery should also prove to be a source of the energy that flows out of marginality.

To conclude, reflecting on centre-periphery relations enables the practitioner to be aware of place. Being aware of place allows the teacher to make use of the strengths of that place and simultaneously encourages the learner to re-think simple cultural representations of centre and periphery. Furthermore, given the dialectic relationship of centre and periphery, introducing this dimension explicitly helps to encourage a grounded knowledge of, not just the periphery, but the role of the centre in constructing notions of peripherality and of the structures that maintain that peripherality.

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